Mad Man: Nero in Modern Advertising

What do Hammermill Paper, Durez Plastics, Nifroform Turf Treatment, Pennzoil, Bud Light, American Bottlers of Carbonated Beverages, and California Raisins have in common? Over the course of the 20th century, each used advertising to harness the cultural capital of Nero in service of their products. The cumulative weight of such consumerist ephemera documents the role that Rome's *scaenicus imperator* played as a salesman who spoke to the acquisitiveness of average Americans. By using approaches drawn from the study of print advertising (e.g. Leach 1993; Fowles 1996; Sivulka 2012) and Classics in pop culture (e.g. Wyke 1997; collected essays in Joshel, Malamud, McGuire 2001; Malamud 2009; Solomon 2016), this paper investigates Nero's reception within this important, understudied material through three core questions. What is the relationship between trends in advertising's fascination with Rome and its specific use of Nero? What are the standard stereotypes associated with Nero in this medium? How are typically negative stereotypes imbued with new meaning that invites the consumer to ally themselves with Nero as a valued guide in making economic and lifestyle choices? For print advertising ultimately requires Nero to play a slightly different role than he does in Hollywood or other modes of satire.

I focus on three examples each of which position Nero (albeit sometimes humorously) as an arbiter of taste. In 1942, Durex Plastics released an ad featuring a futuristic bathroom made of a new material that heralded American architectural ingenuity. The tagline in the middle of the ad reads: "Not since Nero…". In 1968 the California Raisin Advisory Board ran an ad that depicted Imperial Rome engulfed in flames with masses of people running for their lives; Nero and Poppaea sit on a platform discussing culinary artistry. Nero asserts that "nothing perks up my cook-outs like surprising little raisin deserts" to which Poppaea responds "how deliciously

true! … and they pack a substantial amount of natural fruit-sugar – important to people on the go!" The copy below encourages the consumer to demand a dessert with raisins ("it's an idea to fiddle with"). In 1973 Hammermill Bond Paper likewise featured the iconic image of Nero (lyre in hand) watching Rome burn. This time at the center is an image of letterhead with NERO emblazoned on top, the bottom corner singed. The tag line reads, "A good letterhead should fire the imagination." The rest of the copy tells the story of a Nero who wanted to be a poet and didn't let a little fire stand in the way of honing his craft.

Like all advertising these rely on visual/verbal stereotypes that are easy to digest and remember; as such they borrow from Neronian imagery widely disseminated in midcentury pop culture such as Nero the Fiddler, Burner of Rome. In order to work as sales vehicles, however, they also rely on a less often noted popular perception of Neronian Rome as a place of technological and artistic innovation, a world of decadence. We are told to want what Nero has, to follow his tastes (if not his pyromania). As such they speak to an American consumer who, despite the moralizing world of Hollywood in which Nero plays the Big Bad, views Nero as a cipher for the luxury and material ambition that post-Industrial America made part of the American dream. Neronian aspirations are here freed from anxieties about tyranny that other pop culture incarnations aim to inculcate. Through a close reading of these advertisements, this paper uncovers the mechanisms of Nero-as-consumerist-cipher and the psychological triggers embedded within this image.

Despite considerable interest in the cultural legacy of Nero and the role of Hollywood in curating America's receptions of Rome's imperial past (e.g. essays in Elsner and Masters 1994; Wyke 1997; essays in Joshel, Malamud, McGuire 2001), the popularity of Nero in print advertisements has remained relegated to the shadows of cinema studies through notes on

product tie-ins. And yet the 20th century created the field of print advertising with its theories of human psychology and methods for driving evolving consumer cultures. This paper sets the stage for reintegrating print advertising into the study of Neronian reception. In doing so, I also suggest fruitful strategies through which scholars of Classical reception more broadly can approach this rich and diverse source material.

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